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Abstract

Steve Baker, *Artist / Animal*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013

Reviewed by Una Chaudhuri, New York University

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The slash that divides the two words in the title of Steve Baker's eagerly awaited new book has some important rhetorical work to do. It's there to mark an attitude that eventually emerges as a key feature of the author's methodology and a central principle of his critical philosophy. The attitude is one of patient contemplation and measured speculation, the method is one of simple collocation, and the underlying critical conviction is that art – of all kinds, but especially art involving non-human animals – is best left to unspool its meanings and effects over time, in multiple contexts and from plural perspectives, rather than being subjected to stringent tests of ethics, 'taste', and accomplishment.

For those many readers who will already be familiar with the author's seminal *The Postmodern Animal*, this attitude will come as no surprise. Being the theorist of (among other things, but most famously) 'botched taxidermy', Baker has already provided compelling evidence of the value of approaching even the most challenging and unfamiliar art with an open mind and a friendly spirit. In *Artist/Animal* he makes the case for that approach much more explicitly, and the slash in the book's title 'performs' a commitment to 'holding these two terms in juxtaposition, without specifying either the characteristics or the consequences of their alignment' (3). Baker is passionate about tracking the potentially infinite number of ways that artists can find meaning in the figure and body of non-human animals; relatedly, he is concerned to protect that potentiality from restriction by rule-givers, however well meaning they may be.

While *Artist/Animal* is as critically generative as *The Postmodern Animal*, it is also a very different kind of book. Where the earlier volume analysed a teeming profusion of 'animalworks' within the framework of postmodern or posthumanist theory (especially the thought of Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari), this one concentrates on a limited number of

artists, considers a significant number of each artist's works, and discusses the work primarily in relation to two discourses.

The first of these are the artists' own accounts of their art-making and thoughts about its meaning, gathered by Baker in a series of interviews he himself conducted. About this methodology, Baker remarks that it 'might be thought of a deconstruction undertaken with a relatively light touch: the artists' words working on, working against, working away at their work; and the work working on, against, and away at the words' (19). The effect for the reader is the cultivation of a kind of unusual intimacy with the work process not only of the artists but also of Baker himself, as he shares not only what the artists said to him but also how he receives, considers, ruminates, and finally relates those remarks to the works at hand. There is a journalistic quality to this strategy, as well as an informality, which makes the book sometimes feel like a series of studio visits in the company of a curious and genial friend of the artists.

The second framing discourse is Baker's consistent defense of artists' need – and right – to go where their creative instincts lead them, even if that leads them into ethically fraught or intellectually murky territory. This discourse is most explicitly engaged in the Introduction, which begins with the following blunt question: 'Can contemporary artists be trusted with animals, living or dead?' (1). Quickly plunging into a discussion of the contentious reception of two notorious works, Kim Jones's *Rat Piece* (1976) and Marco Evaristi's *Helena* (2000), Baker concludes that 'simply to condemn such works is to learn nothing from them. It is to undermine the very notion of art, to prefer compliance to creativity' (17). This launches the book's dominant theme, reiterated in various formulations throughout its seven chapters, its 'half a dozen short critical reflections', and its Afterword: that the right critical stance for contemporary animal art is sustained, detailed, and non-judgmental attention, a stance that mimics – and thus supports – the fundamental characteristic of the art itself: its welcoming of openness, ambiguity, and improvisation. The art Baker admires – and passionately defends – is an art willing to submit to uncertainty, 'not-knowing', and 'messiness'. He quotes with approval Wendy Wheeler's characterisation of contemporary art as 'the non-instrumental and passionately interested following of hints and hunches' (72), and urges critics to develop a correspondingly provisional, experimental mode of response.

Most of the artists featured in the book – Olly and Suzy, Lucy Kimbell, Catherine Chalmers, Eduardo Kac, Mirea Cantor, Mary Britton Close, Catherine Bell, Sue Coe, Britta Jaschinki, and Angela Singer – will be known to scholars in animal studies, not least from of Baker’s own numerous essays in important critical anthologies of animal studies. They will also be very familiar to readers of *Antennae*, the excellent on-line journal of animals and nature in art. What such readers will get here is not a theoretical systematisation or critical taxonomising of this familiar work, but instead a set of invigorating, illuminating and above all open-ended demonstrations of what it means to pay close attention to everything about an art work – not only its subject matter but also its materiality, its location in time and space, the process of its creation, the thoughts and feelings and views and worries of its makers. About more rigorously academic or theoretical ambitions – like that of Sid Dobrin and Sean Morey to discover a ‘visual eco-language’ of ‘econs’ and ‘ecotypes’ with ‘semiotic rules’, Baker worries that such a project ‘unwittingly calls on something uncomfortably close to the techniques of mass media communication and thus underestimates the importance for contemporary artists of working in a more exploratory manner that is neither rule-bound nor particularly language-like’ (24).

To be sure, Baker occasionally lays out certain other general principles or shared characteristics of the art he is discussion. The ‘Introduction’ lists four: ‘materiality, immediate and direct experience, attentiveness to form, and not judging’ (9). The final chapter of the book, which takes a ‘more speculative’ approach, explores three questions or perspectives towards ‘art’s animals’: their *place* or location, their *form*, and their *medium*. Of these, Baker seems to find the latter – the idea of the animal *as a medium of art* – most intriguing, but he pursues it with characteristic tentativeness: ‘How might such thinking hesitantly begin?’ (215)

Baker’s most direct challenges in this book come in response to readings of two of his artist-subjects work by influential animal studies scholars: Jonathan Burt’s ‘reservations’ about Lucy Kimbell’s work with rats, and Cary Wolfe’s well-known comparative demotion of Sue Coe as ‘humanist’ in relation to Eduardo Kac’s exemplary ‘posthumanism’. In an unusually forthright challenge to Wolfe, Baker remarks that ‘this is all about neat positioning, not messy practices’ (238), and defends Coe’s work as being ‘tied to the totality of the messy and the less-than-always-postmodern world’ (235)! A few pages later Baker graciously recognises Wolfe’s larger contributions to the field of animal studies, and situates his own project in relation to a

distinction Wolfe makes between ‘talking about art in the mode of doing theory’ and talking about art as a ‘practicing artist’. *Artist/Animal*, he avers one final time, seeks to inhabit that slippery, sometimes uncomfortable and always exhilarating space ‘between these two perspectives’. Readers will be grateful for Baker’s patient and generous in-betweenness.